

My name is William Jackson. I am 88 years old and have been working as a Merchant Mariner since 1935. I still volunteer as Chief Engineer on the S. S. Oak Victory, a 1944 Victory ship that is being restored in Richmond, California. I am here to ask you to pass HR23 “A Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007”.

I had shipped for several years as a busboy on passenger and freight ships. But during the summer of 1937, I received the new U. S. Coast Guard identification Z Card and started shipping out of the National Maritime Union hall in New York as a messman. Although my home was on the West Coast, I shipped out of New York because the National Maritime Union had integrated their shipping hall. None of the West Coast unions had and didn't until the Fair Practice Employment Act in the 1960s. Before the United States officially entered World War II on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, I voluntarily sailed on ships into the war zones of Africa, Egypt and the Suez Canal zone. In July, 1941, we witnessed two air raids while our ship was docked next to a drydock where the target of the attack, a British cruiser, was being repaired. Before the official beginning of the War, there were \_\_\_\_\_ U. S. ships sunk or damaged.

On December 7, 1941, I was in San Francisco when Pearl Harbor was bombed. At first, I decided I would contact my classmate from Oakland High School. We had been in R.O.T.C. together, where I had been the only African American person. Together, we went right down to the U. S. Army recruiting station. There were a mixture of other races from Mexico, China and Native Americans. I noticed that they called all the other guys and assigned them and sent them home. I asked them “How about me?” This lady said “Sorry, but we have no place for African American soldiers.” I felt like my heart had stopped. To think that our teachers taught us that we were supposed to be equal

citizens, to vote, to be loyal and to defend our Country in time of war. I became very angry and told them “Don’t ever try to draft me. I just returned from a war zone with the Merchant Marine. I’ll go back and get a ship.” I was never called up by the Draft Board but I saw more action at sea in the North Atlantic and Pacific than lots of men in the Army and Navy did. On December 9<sup>th</sup>, I signed on the S. S. Panaman and continued to sail. In August of 1942, the ship I was on was sunk by enemy action. I was hospitalized in Trinidad for 4 ½ months without pay as was Union policy.

In February, 1943, I refused to sign on as a Steward Department. crew. I had been granted endorsement as “Wiper”, the entry level rating in the engine room, by the U. S. Coast Guard. The National Maritime Union supported my cause. I was assigned to position as wiper on the S. S Exceller. I was refused the berth twice by the 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Engineer but was finally accepted at the insistence of the U. S. Coast Guard and the N.M.U. Late in June, 1943, after 4 months of abuse by the 1<sup>st</sup> Engineer, I had earned the time to sit for the next rating – Fireman/Watertender. I did and passed. I continued sailing throughout the war, and after that, earning ratings of Oiler, Junior, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and then 2<sup>nd</sup> Engineer.

In November, 1963, I took an assignment on the S.S Hope Hospital Ship as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Engineer. This ship would go to 8 different underdeveloped countries, stay for 10 – 11 months and serve as a 125-bed hospital training ship, teaching local medical personnel modern medicine practices. It had a medical staff of 300 people plus 50 doctors who rotated every 2 months. The ship’s crew totaled 76 men with the Engine Room having 26. Our mission was to keep the ship supplied with power as there were three Operating Rooms, I.C. U., 2 Pediatric wards, 2 women’s ward and 2 men’s wards, plus labs, a

dental clinic and more. During that time, I earned promotions to First Engineer and then Chief Engineer. It was the hardest job I ever loved. I officially retired in 1985 but returned to serve in Operation Desert Storm for 2 7-month tours.

The U. S. Merchant Marine was formed by the War Shipping Administration to supply manpower to man the vast number of merchant ships to carry all the war materials, troops, planes, food, etc. to Allies around the world on all fighting fronts. To do this, they needed as many as 230,000 seamen to man over 5,000 new ships that were to be built. Ships would need all ratings of seamen – deck, engine room and stewards.

The Merchant Marine was the first of all services to integrate. It may have taken the union and the U. S. Coast Guard to make the steamship company give me the right to sail in the Engine room but it did integrate the ships of the Merchant Marine. And the Merchant Marine service schools were integrated between 1942 and 1943. The Merchant Marine was the first to integrate and make my dreams come true.

Today, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007, I appear before you to request passage of HR23 “A Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007”. I had a tough time of it in the U. S. Merchant Marine but did win equality on a racial level. Now I am asking for equality with all other United States Veterans for benefits denied the Merchant Mariners by the G. I. Bill of Rights of 1944.

Mr. Chairman and the entire Veterans Affairs Committee, I thank you.

STATEMENT

of

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On

HR23

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